

Wednesday Evening Bible Study

January 18, 2023

Series - *The Life and Writings of the Apostle Paul*

The Letter to the Romans

The Righteousness of God

Text – Romans 3:21 - 31 – *Justification by Faith*

Introduction

From Romans 1:18 down through Romans 3:20, Paul had proven his case that everybody is guilty before God, and therefore no one can earn salvation through adherence to the Old Testament Law. Verses 19 and 20 sum this idea up very well:

"Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin." (Romans 3:19-20)

Now that the bad news has been clearly and thoroughly explained, Paul will now begin to announce the good news that there is another way, and only one other way. Man can be saved apart from the Law, but only through faith in the atonement made by the Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross of Calvary.

To go to Heaven, you must be completely righteous. You cannot achieve righteousness through the deeds of the Law – your good works, because you could not keep the Law – nobody could. That is man's problem, your problem. However, God did not leave you in a hopeless condition, He provided a solution that provided atonement for your sins, and a transfer of perfect righteousness to your account. All of that happened because Jesus Christ, God's Son, shed His blood and died for you on the cross of Calvary. He paid the atonement price for your sins with His own blood, and if you place your faith in Him and His atonement on the Cross, you can receive His righteousness. Once that you have received His righteousness through faith, you become a born-again child of God, and can then enter Heaven.

This is an extremely important portion of Scripture.

"There is not probably in the whole Bible a passage which sets forth more profoundly the righteousness of God in Christ." (John Calvin)

Explanation of terms:

In this section of Romans 3, we will see 5 very important words that will need to be defined so that we can fully grasp the good news.

Justification (δικαίωσις – *dikaiōsis*) – a form of this word appears several times in this passage (justified [vs. 20, 24 & 28]; just [v. 26 - δίκαιος - *dikaios* - oftentimes translated righteous {v. 10}]; justifier [v. 26]; justify [v. 20], though we won't see this particular word (justification) until we get to chapter 4. To justify means to declare to be righteous and free from guilt. To be made acceptable to God. To be justified means to be seen by God JUST as IF I'D never sinned.

Note - justification and sanctification are not the same. Justification is an act, not a process. Sanctification is the lifelong process by which God makes the believer more like Christ.

Righteousness (δικαιοσύνη *dikaiosynē*) – appears 4 times in this passage (vs. 21, 22, 25, and 26). Vines Expository Dictionary defines righteousness as the state of him who is as he ought to be, the condition acceptable to God. We use the word “righteous” in both a positional and practical way. Positional righteousness is when we are seen as righteous in the sight of God, whereas practical righteousness has to do with our actual behavior.

Propitiation (ἱλαστήριον – *hilastērion*) – this Greek word is used only here and in Hebrews 9:5, where it is translated into the phrase “mercy seat”. It has to do with appeasement, expiation, or atonement for sin through the blood sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. Another form of the Greek word (ἱλασμός *hilasmos*) is used twice in 1 John and is also translated into the English word “Propitiation”.

"And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." (1 John 2:2)

"Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." (1 John 4:10)

According to Warren Wiersbe: “In human terms, “propitiation” means appeasing someone who is angry, usually by a gift. But this is not what it means in the Bible. “Propitiation” means the satisfying of God’s holy Law, the meeting of its just demands, so that God can freely forgive those who come to Christ.”¹

Grace (χάρις - *charis*) – unmerited favour – receiving what I do not deserve. Grace is the other side of the coin of “mercy” – not receiving what I do deserve. (Hell – *the wages of sin is death* – [Romans 6:23b])

Redemption (ἀπολύτρωσις - *apolytrōsis*) – According to Vine’s, it is a releasing effected by payment of ransom; redemption, deliverance; liberation procured by the payment of a

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 523). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

ransom. Christ's atonement paid the ransom and liberated us from the penalty of our sins.

I. The Belief of the Individual is Essential

"But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets;" (Romans 3:21)

Notice the phrase "But now" – we have left the darkness and have entered into the light. We have left the bad news of man's condemnation and are entering the "good news" of salvation. (See Romans 6:23 for a similar "but")

Notice the phrase "righteousness of God" in vs. 21 and 22 ("his righteousness" in vs. 25 and 26). The type of righteousness that Paul was explaining was not a human goodness, which, according to Isaiah 64:6 is nothing but filthy rags anyway; but this righteousness is the perfect, sinless, and holy righteousness of God. Notice also that this was not a new concept; the Old Testament Law and Prophets had already witnessed or attested to the fact that God's righteousness could be imputed to men through faith. Paul will develop this more fully in chapter four when he discusses the faith of Abraham and David. It is important to understand that salvation by faith is not only a New Testament teaching. Salvation has always been and could only be by faith. The Law never saved anybody, it only condemned.

"Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference:" (Romans 3:22)

We receive the righteousness of God by faith. All that believe, and only those that believe receive the righteousness of Christ. We are all completely lost, and we all need to believe to be saved.

"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;" (Romans 3:23)

This verse in principle applies to everybody, but was most likely written to emphasize the fact that both Jews and Gentiles needed to believe in Christ, because both Jews and Gentiles had sinned:

"What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin;" (Romans 3:9)

Notice – we all "fall short" – illustrate this by asking 3 different people to do a long jump in the front of the auditorium.

II. The Blood of Christ is the Necessary Element

This has to do with the object of our faith. What do we need to believe? Do we just believe in the existence of Christ, or even the deity of Christ, or is there more to it?

"Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:"

(Romans 3:24)

Here is where we again see that word "justify", which means to declare or render to be righteous. The word, "freely" (δωρεάν *dōrean*) means without a cause or without a basis or reason:

*"But this cometh to pass, that the word might be fulfilled that is written in their law, They hated me **without a cause.** (δωρεάν - *dōrean*)"* (John 15:25)

In other words, there was nothing in us that caused God to justify us.

Notice - we are rendered or declared righteous by his grace (unmerited or undeserved favor – Ephesians 2:8 & 9 refer to this grace as a gift). What did He give us? Redemption, and that redemption came through (or was "in") Christ Jesus.

"But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;)"
(Ephesians 2:4-5)

John Bunyan was driven almost to distraction because he realized that he was such a great sinner with no righteousness of his own. And he said at that time, "When God showed me John Bunyan as God saw John Bunyan, I no longer confessed I was a sinner, but I confessed that I was sin from the crown of my head to the sole of my feet. I was full of sin." And Bunyan struggled with the problem of how he could stand in God's presence even with his sins forgiven. Where could he gain a standing before God? And so, walking through the cornfields one night, as he wrestled with this problem, the words of Paul (who was another great sinner, who called himself the chief of sinners) came to him, and his burden rolled off his shoulders. The word from Paul was Philippians 3:9: "And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith." And when you read Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, you're reading actually the story of Bunyan's life. And you remember, when Pilgrim came with that great burden on his shoulders through the Slough of Despond, he didn't know what to do until finally he came to the Cross, and there the burden rolled off, and he trusted Christ as his Savior.²

But what do we need to believe about Christ Jesus?

"Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God;"

(Romans 3:25)

² McGee, J. V. (1991). *Thru the Bible commentary: The Epistles (Romans 1-8)* (electronic ed., Vol. 42, p. 69). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Here is the word propitiation, which means atonement; but notice very carefully that atonement can only come through faith. That means that everything is in place for your sins to be atoned for, but faith is what unlocks the door. The blood that Christ shed on the Cross of Calvary was and still is sufficient to atone for every man's sin but is efficient only for those who believe.

Notice the word "forbearance". That word is only used here and in Romans 2:4. Forbearance has to do with tolerance and longsuffering. The only reason God can tolerate or put up with us with all our sin is because of the blood of Christ. "When I see the blood, I will pass over you". God can tolerate or forbear sinners because He sees us through the propitiation, "the mercy seat". (Hebrews 9:5)

"To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus." (Romans 3:26)

Only God can justify sinners as they cannot justify themselves, and justification is only possible through faith. Remember, the Pharisees tried to justify themselves (Luke 16:14 – 15), and so did the lawyer in Luke 10:27, but justification can only come through faith in the propitiation offered on the Cross by the Lord Jesus.

III. Boasting About Your Goodness is Excluded (vs. 27 – 31)

"Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith." (Romans 3:27)

Men love to justify themselves – make themselves look good. Men love to boast. Frank Sinatra's famous song said, "I did it my way". God says that man has absolutely nothing to boast about, because we did nothing to earn salvation. Salvation is a gift. It's free.

Illustration from Chuck Swindoll:

If there's one kind of person I admire least, it's the "self-made man."

I've been around a lot of those in my ministry—men and women who start with nothing and, through grit, sweat, and sacrifice, become amazingly significant (at least as the world judges significance). They invariably rise to the top of any organization or must run their own. While I'm not overly impressed by people the world calls "successful," I do admire many of their qualities. I appreciate their charisma. I marvel at their uncanny ability to motivate people and coordinate their efforts. I respect their dogged determination, their maverick spirit, their refusal to allow the majority opinion to deter them from doing what they know is right. And I rejoice with them when their honest efforts are rewarded handsomely. But I don't admire self-made people because they too often worship their maker. Of course, you don't have to be rich to be a self-made person. Churches are full of them—

people who daily labor in sweatshops of religion, desperately trying to crank out more good deeds than their neighbors, hoping to impress the gatekeepers of heaven. And, ironically, at the end of their labors, just before lowering them into the ground, a congregation of their closest family and friends join in singing their favorite hymn:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound—
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind but now I see. ’
’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.

John Newton did not write a hymn in honor of self-made righteousness. His stanzas resound from an empty soul that longs to be filled from above. Those who presume to work for their place in heaven should sing instead:

Excessive works! How sweaty the sound
That came from the god in me!
I once was bad but now I’m good
Thanks to my sincerity.
’Twas works that earned my place with God
And deeds that made Him smile.
How long I toiled and proved my worth
And trudged that second mile.
When we’ve been there ten thousand years
Being paid our hard-earned fun,
We’ve no less days to sing our praise
And boast of all we’d done!

This is not the gospel that Paul received from Jesus Christ and then dedicated his life to teaching! The good news is not a “find the good in you and make it grow” kind of message. The gospel does not suggest in the least that “God helps those who help

themselves.” In fact, the good news begins with a clear understanding of the truth of our sin-sick condition: it’s terminal! Fortunately, it’s also curable. However, the deadly disease of sin cannot be treated with good nutrition and vigorous exercise—as good as those are. We need radical surgery. We are spiritually dead, and we need nothing less than a transplant.³

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Preaching Point – Be careful about boasting. Give all the glory to God!

"Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law."
(Romans 3:28)

Righteousness can only come through faith in Christ. You and I are simply not good enough to redeem ourselves. The only work you and I need to do is a work of God – that is, believe on Christ.

"Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent." (John 6:28-29)

"Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also:"
(Romans 3:29)

"Seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith." (Romans 3:30)

In these concluding verses, Paul drives home the point again that both Jews and Gentiles alike need to be justified through faith.

In v. 31, however, Paul will make an interesting point – the Law is “established” or supported, strengthened, made to stand, through faith.

"Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law."
(Romans 3:31)

Paul will continue elaborating on the doctrine of justification by faith in chapter four.

³ Swindoll, Charles R. (2010-03-24). Insights on Romans (Swindoll's New Testament Insights) (pp. 59-60). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.